DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 035 TM 031 640

AUTHOR Cagiltay, Kursat; Bichelmeyer, Barbara
TITLE Differences in Learning Styles in Different Cultures: A Qualitative Study.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Style; *Cultural Differences; Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Qualitative Research
IDENTIFIERS Turks; United States

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study explores culture and learning styles relationships for three Turkish and two U.S. graduate students at a U.S. university. Each participant provided information in a semistructured interview for about 2 hours. All three Turkish students stressed the conservative nature of their culture and its effects on learning. Turkish students did not perceive a high level of collaboration in Turkish schools where students typically worked alone because the system was based on rote learning. Turkish students indicated the difficulties they had faced in writing reflection papers and the problems they experienced with the interactive nature of the courses. Findings show that culture has some effect on learning styles. Cultural expectations toward power relationships in the classroom have some impact on students' preferences regarding learning strategies. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 445 035

Differences in Learning Styles in Different Cultures: A Qualitative Study

Kursat Cagiltay and Barbara Bichelmeyer

Indiana University, Bloomington

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

K Cagiltay

1

Brief Abstract:
This article uses a set of data from a qualitative study to document, explore and explain culture and learning style relationships in a cross-cultural environment. Participants in the study were three Turkish and two American graduate students. The data revealed that culture has some effect on learning style.

TM031640

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Differences in Learning Styles in Different Cultures: A Qualitative Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather data regarding the impact of culture on learning style and to explore the differences of learning styles of students from Turkish and American cultures. In general, the researchers expected to uncover and describe what beliefs, values and attitudes structure the learning behavior of learners from the two different cultures of Turkey and America. Attempts were made to discover how and why certain differences occur, what common and uncommon cultural patterns exist. This qualitative study was focused on perspectives of the participants of the study in order to uncover the complexity of human behavior in such framework and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening in this context (Merriam, 1988).

Definitions and Assumptions of this Study

"Learning styles" is defined by the National Association of Secondary School Principles as the composite of characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological factors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment (Keefe, 1979). It is the opinion of the researchers that learning style is also shaped to some extent by culture. Since we do not know exactly to which extent culture impacts learning styles, more studies are needed to explore this question.

Kotz (1988) states that the terms "learning style" and "cognitive style" are used interchangeably in the literature. In this study, the term "learning styles" is used broadly, and may be viewed as similar to terms such as "preferred learning strategies" or "preferred learning approaches". Therefore, in this study, the term "learning styles" is not meant to represent any specific model offered by any particular researcher, but is generally intended to include both the information processing strategies that are related to personal traits and the consistent preferences of students as they approach and learn a task in characteristic ways.

Literature Review

Anthropologist Edward Burnett, in 1871, defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Britannica, 1998).

On the surface, the concepts of "learning style" and "culture" appear to be contradictory. The notion of learning style implies individual differences. Culture on the other hand, refers not to what is individual but to what is shared by a group of individuals. Culture refers to what is

common to members of a group. It concerns similarities, not differences. If learning styles differ from person to person, can such a thing as a cultural learning style exist? Research's answer for this question is "yes". People "learn how to learn" through the socialization processes that occur in societies (Nelson, 1995).

In culture-related research, researchers generally try to build models to understand general characteristics of culture. Researchers use models because there are no analytical, mathematically-correct and proven methods that can be used for complex cases. Simply, we can say that a model is a kind of abstraction. It is obvious that the model always has flaws, inconsistencies that can not be accounted for. Yet, using these models as a framework for research helps to improve the model, and in turn, helps the researcher better understand the phenomenon being studied.

The most popular cultural model studies are from Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1994), and were built to represent the business environments. In 1986, Hofstede adopted his model to explore the cultural differences in teaching and learning.

Griggs (1991) attempted to provide a framework for the growing number of different learning style models. Some of them are Curry's "Onion Model", Kolb's "Model of Information Processing", Dunn and Dunn's "Learning Style Model" and Keefe's "Human Information Processing Model."

Research shows that individuals within a culture tend to have a common pattern of learning and perception when members of their culture are compared to members of another culture (Oxford and Anderson, 1995). Sewisher and Deyhle (1987) note that educators have researched academic failure of minority youth for many years. Initial explanations were based on genetic characteristics, racial segregation and cultural deprivation. In the 1970's, however the cultural difference hypothesis was presented as an alternative. Ramirez and Williams (1974) found significant differences among African, Mexican and Anglo-Americans' cognitive styles in terms of field independence and field dependence. In a review of literature about American Indian youth, Swisher & Deyhle (1987) found that culture plays an important role in how students have learned to learn at home. When faced with a different style at school, the students change (or at least it is expected) his/her style to become a participant in a new cultural context. A similar study was conducted by Dunn et.al. (1990) on elementary-age students from four ethnic backgrounds (African American, Chinese American, Greek American and Mexican American).

They found that children from different subcultures of America have different patterns of preferred learning strategies. Another significant finding of this research was related to the physical environment (temperature, light, etc.) of the classroom and the cultural preference of students. According to this research, students from different cultures had different preferences about the physical conditions of the classrooms.

Research Questions and Significance of Study

In this study, by comparing different cultures, the researcher attempted to explore the answers for the following general questions:

> What beliefs, values and attitudes structure learning behaviors of learners from the different cultures of Turkey and America? Are there differences of learning styles among these different cultures? If yes, what are the main factors of culture on those learning style differences? What strategies are developed by the learners to cope with the perplexities of cross-cultural learning situations?

Hofstede (1980) wrote that the survival of mankind will depend to a large extent on the ability of people who think differently to act together. Since the interaction between societies has increased incredibly in this century, culture-related research has become more important.

In particular, this research will help us to better understand the learning style differences between learners of Turkish and American cultures; in the long run we hope that it will help people to overcome problems that may occur in these cross-cultural learning environments. In general, this type of research is especially important in order to determine appropriate interpersonal relations in many types of cross-cultural learning environments and to overcome the potential effects of group differences, in order to create satisfying and productive partnerships among people separated by culture.

Conflicts occur when a student has a learning style that differs from the instructional style of the teacher, especially when the teacher does not understand the cultural and personal reasons for this difference. Cross-cultural understanding of learning styles is crucial to success in teaching and learning in a multi-cultural setting. Oxford and Anderson (1995) believe that a continued theoretical analysis of this issues is necessary not only to increase our understanding of intercultural communication but also to improve our ability to help members of one culture to communicate effectively with members of another culture.

Methodology

According to Glass and Hopkins (1996), a phenomenon can not be completely explained by statistics; therefore in this study, qualitative data analysis was used to examine the research question, which is based completely upon a complex phenomenon of the human learning mechanism. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants from different cultures about their learning styles and the effect of their cultures.

Participants

This research was conducted at a large Midwestern American university. In this study, five graduate students from two different countries (three from Turkey and two from America) were interviewed about their learning styles and the effect of their culture on these styles. In order to keep the identity of the participants confidential, fictional names are used in this report.

Turkish Participants

Turkish Female Participant-1 (Peri). Peri is 25-year-old doctoral student in the School of Education with an undergraduate and masters degrees from two different Turkish universities. The university where she took her masters follows American university style and the language of education is in English. At the time Peri was interviewed for this study, she had been living in the USA for three months and was in her first semester at the university. She never lived in another country before coming to the USA. Peri feels that she belongs to both Turkish culture and the Caucasus sub-culture of Turkey. She grew up in a typical Turkish family (typical characteristics of a Turkish family are collectivistic, masculine, respect to adults, respect to visitors). She stated that her family is a little bit different than the classical, authoritative Turkish family structure, in that it is more democratic. Her father is a faculty member in a Turkish university and has a degree from an American university. Her mother is a housewife. This participant had about six months teaching experience in a Turkish high school.

Turkish Female Participant-2 (Bengisu). Bengisu is also 25-year-old graduate student in the School of Education and has an undergraduate degree from a Turkish university. At the time Bengisu was interviewed for this study, she had been living in the USA for three months and was in her first semester in this university. She never lived in another country before coming to the USA. She feels that she belongs to the Turkish culture. She grew up in a typical Turkish family. This participant had a short teaching experience in a Turkish high school.

Turkish Male Participant (Evran). Evran is a 24-year-old graduate student in the School of Education. He had undergraduate degree from a Turkish university. At the time Evran was interviewed for this study, he had been living in the USA for three months and was in his first semester in this university. He never lived in another country before coming to the USA. He feels himself belong to the Turkish culture. He is from a typical Turkish family. Most of his educational experiences were in government-funded boarding schools in Turkey. This participant had about six months teaching experience in a Turkish high school.

American Participants

American Female Participant (Susan). Susan is a 32-year-old graduate student in the School of Education. She feels that she belongs to Caucasian American culture and she is from a white middle-class American family in East Coast. She had some teaching experiences both in college and K-12 schools. Since she taught Spanish, she has been exposed to Hispanic culture. She has been in contact with many people from different cultures during her undergraduate and graduate education.

American Male Participant (John). John is 30-year-old graduate student in the School of Education. He also feels that he belongs to Caucasian American culture and he is from a white middle-class American family in West Coast. He had some teaching experiences in both college and K-12 schools. Before coming to college, he had been exposed to Hispanic culture. He has had contact with many people from different cultures during his undergraduate and graduate education. One of his relatives is married to a person from a Middle Eastern country.

Instrumentation

The main data collection instrument was the semi-structured interview, and each interview took about two hours.

As stated in literature review section, there are some cultural model studies about learning styles. Hofstede's (1986) general 4-D cultural model is the most cited and widely used model among researchers; therefore, the interview questions were adapted from that instrument.

A pilot interview session was held with another Turkish student before conducting the actual interviews, and the interview protocol was edited and revised based on this pilot interview.

The interview protocol generally consisted of three sections. First, a background section in which information was gathered about each participant's demographics, as well as their family, cultural and educational experiences. The second section of the interview included general

questions about participants' perceptions of the impact of their culture on their preferred learning styles. A sample of questions included in this section of the interview are, " Do you think that your culture has an effect on your learning style?" "Do learners in your culture, or do you personally prefer: details of concepts or first start from total than go specific? To learn by competition/collaboration? To work alone or in pairs/groups? To accept the stated hypothesis of a teacher? Visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning?" Finally, the third section of the interview protocol was specifically for Turkish students, and questions focused on their transition from Turkish to American culture and learning environments.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from each interview using three different media: videotape, audiotape and field notes.

At the beginning of each interview, the participant was made aware of issues related to confidentiality and was asked for consent to join the study and to recording the interview session. The researcher also explained the purpose of the study to each participant.

The participants were encouraged to view the researcher as a total stranger to their culture and to talk without assuming that the researcher might know something about their culture. Participants were asked to view the researcher as a creature from another planet and totally unfamiliar with their culture. They were also reminded that the researcher would primarily ask questions and would expect them to do most talking.

The interviews generally followed the interview protocol. However, since these were intended to be semi-structured interviews, sessions were not strictly dependent on the interview questions, and talk was mainly determined by participants' ideas and responses.

The major qualitative strategies that were followed to address the issues of validity and reliability in this study were triangulation of data through multiple sources of data and multiple methods, member checking with participants to discover whether interview data were accurate and complete, peer examination of data by others from the same cultures as the research participants, and examination of researcher bias (the assumptions, worldview and theoretical orientation of the researchers) at the outset of the study.

Reliability was also addressed through the use of an external judge who served as auditor for the study. The judge was a Turkish doctoral student in the School of Education with a strong background in the Turkish education system. He received his high school education in a Turkish

teacher training school and obtained both undergraduate and masters degrees from a School of Education in Turkey. The auditor examined the researchers' procedure regarding how data were collected, how categories were derived in data analysis, and procedures for management of the study.

In order to avoid the danger of ethnocentrism (the exaggerated tendency to think the characteristics of one's own group are preferable to those of other groups), the researcher reviewed work by others related to the question under study. The researchers also discussed the research questions with people from other cultures to minimize the cultural bias that come from personal cultural backgrounds. Finally, participants were encouraged to consider the researcher as a total stranger to their culture and not to assume that the researcher was familiar with their culture.

Since this is a qualitative study, there is no assumption of generalizability of these findings, nor do the researchers attempt to make inferences about greater populations.

Regarding cultural pollution and sample selection, it is difficult to say that the participants of the study were "culturally" representative of their cultures' characteristics. It is highly probable that most of them have been affected by other cultures (especially Turkish participants who have been exposed to mass media). During data collection and analysis, the researchers kept this point under consideration.

Data Analysis

Interview transcription was the first step of data analysis. Since interviews with Turkish participants were conducted in Turkish, they were translated to English. As part of this process, transcriptions were showed to participants for member check. Participants read and verified their session notes.

In an initial data sort, the researcher looked first for similarities in the data from participants of the same cultures and secondly for data that captured major differences between participants from the same culture. Data were initially organized according to those two categories.

Five major themes for the study emerged from data analysis, and responses of the participants were interpreted according to those themes. These themes are used to organize the findings section of this paper. The first theme addresses participants beliefs about conservatism and difference, and their relationship to collectivism and individualism in Turkish and American cultures. The second theme addresses issues related to collaboration and competition in each

culture. The third theme addresses issues related to the role of teachers in each culture. The fourth theme addressed the difficulties that Turkish students faced with learning in a new cultural setting. Finally, the fifth theme deals with students' perceptions regarding the forces of change at work in each culture.

Findings

Conservativism and Difference in Turkey and America

All Turkish students stressed the conservative characteristics of their culture and its effects on learning. They stated that different and divergent ideas are not accepted easily and such ideas bring negative reactions. In order to explain his point, Evran stated that, "People can not question the well-accepted ideas, if they question then this gets reaction."

The major contrasting aspects of the two cultures was evident in the participants conversations about the main characteristics of their culture. When the American participants listed the characteristics of their culture, the first items listed were democracy and the existence of a variety of different cultures. According to John, "People want to be their own self and be independent, which we try to have a democracy, which represents us." For Susan, it is the variety of different beliefs and the widely different backgrounds that define and create a democracy.

None of the Turkish participants mentioned democracy as a major characteristic of their culture, rather they listed hospitality, traditions, and importance of family as the major elements of their culture. Peri said, "We generally accept the traditions without questioning [...] We tend to think with our traditions rather than logical thinking." A recent study of Turkish high school and college students found that the majority of the participants have a tendency toward an authoritarian approach and show little tolerance for different ideas (Zaman, 2000).

According to the American participants, the democratic aspect of their culture is reflected in the classroom. Susan's perception was that, "Students definitely tend to question when they disagree or are not satisfied with teachers in certain ways. And I would say that this increases the higher up the continuum you get. "

On the other hand, all of the Turkish participants agree that the classroom environment of their schools was not democratic. The interaction is mainly in one way (from teacher to students), free participation is not a general characteristic of typical Turkish classrooms. According to Bengisu, "If you question the teacher in the classroom, he/she generally shows negative reaction to you."

In general, the Turkish participants spoke primarily about restricting factors of Turkish society. Two of the participants complained about these factors, yet they themselves had a tendency to apply those restrictions to children. For example, Peri complained about the power of authority and an individual's weaknesses against this power. She noted that the roots of this authoritarian approach come from family structures, but said she would not want change, "Kids in Western culture are not under much control, I think this is not good. I prefer my culture's approach here."

Another Turkish participant, Evran, did not appreciate some aspects of the loss of authority of teachers in classroom. "In the USA," he said, " students are more free, they call their professors with their first names, they start to talk in class without taking teacher's permission and even they eat something during the class. I think some of them are not very suitable behaviors, e.g. asking questions without getting permission."

Effects of individualism/collectivism.

In collectivistic cultures, group and family relations matter more than in individualistic cultures (Hofstede 1980). This aspect of collectivism was mentioned by Turkish participants in this study. When explaining major aspects of their culture compared with American culture, they perceived that Turkish families are generally closer to each other than American families. In Turkey, even when they have sufficient personal finances, children generally live together with their families until marriage. Families offer both financial and emotional support. Evran said, "In my culture, before doing something or acting, people first think about the reaction of the society." Bengisu had an interesting comment about this aspect of culture, "...you are not an individual, actually you are a part of a whole and you are an individual together with the whole." This collectivist disposition also has ramifications in the classroom. All Turkish participants stated that being a part of classroom is more important than being an individual, particularly in terms of group support. Bengisu said, "if your friend has problems, you have to help him/her, including cheating in the exam, to make him/her successful. People call "cheat" as "help" or "supporting each other," and in order to support your friend you can do something wrong, even though you know it is wrong."

Susan, an American, also appeared to recognize the American emphasis on individualism as compared to the collectivism of other cultures. She gave an example from her experience with Hispanic students. (In terms of the collectivistic aspect, Hispanic and Turkish cultures seem to be

relatively similar). Susan stated, "I noticed one thing years ago, the program was Spanish literature. There were Hispanic students and in an exam one of the students asked another student about the answer of a question, the other student told him. After the test, American students thought that it was terrible because they were cheating. The Hispanic students said it was OK for the group to help someone when they were taking such a test, because when we work we always try to work in a team. So, I noticed that there is a style difference and how they view team participation vs. how we tend to do things."

Collaboration and Competition

Contrary to initial expectations, and differing from Bayram and Seels (1997) research, Turkish participants did not perceive the existence of high level of collaboration in Turkish schools. Actually, participants expressed the feeling that lack of collaboration is caused by the very nature of the Turkish educational system. Since students do not need to collaborate to learn something, they tend to work alone. Collaboration is limited to sharing notes or resources. Since the system is generally based on rote learning, students can pass by simply memorizing, without interpreting and without working in groups. Therefore, people tend to work by themselves. According to Peri, "If you memorize more, you can get better grades and become a better student. So, we might say that it is memorization-based competition. Actually you do not need to be very good. Because of the system, if you get 5 over 10 you can pass. So, many students like to study just to get 5."

Both American participants stated that collaboration has been encouraged in the American educational system in recent years, and perceive that this trend was most probably initiated by demand from business interests. According to American participants, they are very competitive when they are working on individual assignments. They characterize the American educational system as competitive in general, especially at higher levels. High school are seen as competitive, because students need good grades for scholarships. John said, "The general culture is also competitive, but there is a trend to more collaborative environments in business." He further states, "In education there is a huge movement for collaboration, teacher to teacher, school to school, student to student." Susan states that, "Cooperation is harder to learn. Because in the past we trained for competition, survival of the fittest... but in life it might be the best tool that you can learn is cooperation."

The Role of The Teacher

Authority and Questioning

All of the participants had teaching experience, therefore the researcher had the opportunity to hear participants' ideas from both the teacher and student perspective. According to Turkish participants, in Turkey students generally do not question the information that is given by the teachers. Teachers are the main source of information and sole authority in the classroom. American participants stated that, in classroom, students could question or challenge their teachers freely. One Turkish participant, Peri, had an interesting story about this aspect of her culture. In a class during the second year of college, she attempted to explain her view, which was different than the instructor's. The instructor's reaction to this attempt was extremely harsh. Peri says, "It was so terrible that I cried in the class and then I never talked again in that class." As seen in this example, the teacher did not appreciate counter-ideas in his/her classroom. The existence of such a situation is seen as an attack to the teacher's authority. According to Peri, her professor's reaction is a typical behavior of many faculties and the situation is worse in elementary, middle and high schools. In support of this, Evran argues, "In our culture people tend to accept hypothesis or ideas that are given by authorities. They do not question them much."

One possible cause of this discouragement of questioning might be the past theocratic roots of the Turkish culture. Cook (1999) suggested that the theocratic approach reflects on the educational system as indoctrination. Indoctrination prevents questioning and critically analyzing the status of beliefs. Bengisu explicitly stated that religion has an obvious effect on schools. Her perspective is that, since Turkey is a secular country, the effect of religion does not come from the official educational system, but instead from the unwritten rules and values of the society, even affecting students' relationships in the classroom.

Another main reason for such rigorous classroom order may be the traditional family structure. All Turkish participants argued that traditional family values have effects on the educational system; therefore family and the school systems are similar to each other. In general, children can not object to their father and mother, families expect their children to follow the order of adults. It is widely accepted that being quiet is a well-behaved attitude for a child. This situation is similar to expectations in the classroom environment, where the teacher replaces the role of father/mother. All Turkish participants agreed that Turkish students have respect for authority, that the teacher has great authority in the classroom, and that the teacher is the focal

point of the learning process. Promoting such attitudes are Turkish parenting proverbs such as, "the child's bones are mine and their flesh the teacher's." Evran commented on this aspect of culture, "When a kid starts to the school, the family's expectation from the teacher is to control him/her in a similar way as his/her father." Peri also had parallel comments, "I do not remember a single high school course that we had an open discussion environment. This might be caused by the family structure of Turkey. Because in our families, the father has the main authority, therefore in most families whatever he says is like an order. So this structure reflects to the school environment." Furthermore, Bengisu thinks that since the teacher has authority in the classroom similar to a father-figure, families do not criticize this authority. She argues, "Even if the teacher applies corporal punishment, the family generally thinks that the teacher did the right thing."

Contrary to the Turkish participants in this study, American participants stated that in American classrooms, students can question the information given by the teacher. The degree of questioning increases as the student's level in school increases. John says, "In my culture, you can challenge anything that said because it may or may not be true, and it doesn't matter who says it. You may challenge and question it [...] but this is not especially encouraged by teachers."

Susan had some reservations about the perceptions of other American participants that questioning is generally accepted in American classrooms. "We can not say that, in general, teachers are very authoritative or very democratic. It changes person to person. There is no certain pattern. Compared to other cultures, I think our teachers are more approachable. For example, I do not know many cultures in which they would call their professors by their first names. But this doesn't happen at all institutions. Here, we try to be open. Especially nowadays, you are encouraged to communicate more with students and parents. We all try to look at each other's point of view," she said.

Teaching Styles

According to Turkish participants, memorization and rote learning are widely used in the Turkish educational system for the learning process. Historically, memorization of the religious book was the main focus of education and therefore, memorization, like authoritarianism, has its roots in religion. Today, many people and even some professors continue to believe that this is the best way to teach children. One Turkish professor states that, "using memorization during

early school years is like writing on a rock. He/she can keep it forever and it becomes effective. Zaman (1999)"

Peri said, "Since the system is based on rote learning, the students can pass just by memorizing, without interpreting and without working in groups." Bengisu supported Peri's ideas by saying, "in our schools, there is a lot of memorization and not much of your own ideas. Teacher wants students to get whatever he/she gives." Evran agrees, "I believe that our educational system is based on memorization and this is somehow accepted by the society. Many things are taught in the school, but after finishing the semester, students remember only small portion of it." In addition to this, he says, "Students do not make research to learn something, they get the information only from the teacher and teachers do not encourage research-based learning."

According to Evran, the heavy content load of the current curriculum also fosters a rote-learning style. He says, "Since the students have to take a lot of courses (e.g. 10-12 courses in secondary school) and in every course they use 200-300 pages books, it becomes a more memorization-based system." Bayram and Seels (1997) state that the Turkish educational system has crowded classrooms and heavily loaded teachers. Perhaps teachers do not have the chance to apply different methods for teaching due to the crowded nature of and the heavily loaded curriculum.

The American participants did not discuss rote-learning styles in the classroom. According to these participants, there has been a change in American classrooms over the past 10 years. They say there is more cooperative learning and more real-life-related learning activities. Susan stated, "We like to collaborate but it is also competitive. Sometimes we cooperate because there are a lot of times in real life we have to cooperate to get things done. In cooperative learning, sometimes students are given a role and sometimes they are allowed to be natural [...] This is true more in the past 10 years, as teachers have been trying to add more cooperative learning, students learn how to work together. Teachers generally encourage students to cooperate."

Impact of a Centralized System on Teacher Roles

Another issue was the central management of the Turkish educational system. In the Turkish system, teachers are not allowed to make choices regarding their own curriculum, but instead, they must follow a centrally determined plan. According to Peri, the system does not give teachers the opportunity to do different things. "When I was teaching, I was trying to approach

students and give lectures in a different style," she stated. "I did not use memorization as a part of my teaching approach. This also had some risks, for example when the principal entered the classroom in the middle of the class, you had to switch to the classical approach. Another problem is centralized and standard lesson plans. Since I was following my own teaching style, it was almost impossible to follow that strict plan." As seen here, for a teacher it is very hard to exit from the general frame of the system. It is possible that, in order to meet the expectations of the centralized system, for teachers the only manageable way is to follow the rote-learning approach.

Problems of Learning in a Different Cultural Setting

Different Teaching Style

A major difficulty for these Turkish students in attending a US university is related to the different teaching approach used in America. Since generally the Turkish educational system is based on a strong teacher-centered approach, when the Turkish participants started their education in the US, they faced challenges in adapting to the system. At the beginning of their first semester, each of the Turkish participants said they had particular difficulties with writing reflection papers. While they all had initial language problems, the difficulties with writing reflection papers were different than the language problems. The Turkish students indicated that their difficulties were mainly caused by the lack of a reflective approach in the Turkish educational system. Peri talked about her first experience with reflections, "In one class we, three or four new Turkish students, wrote a reflection paper. When the instructor read our reflections, he said that our papers were completely different than other students'. This reflection was about a seminar-type activity and we all wrote about what we saw there. after [the instructor's] explanations we realized that we should write about our own thoughts, what we think about it, what was good, what was not good, etc." Bengisu said, "before coming here, I was expecting to read a specific resource (a book or a journal), to learn all the details of that resource, and to listen a lecture. But here, we do not follow that kind of approach [...] we have to create new things and new ideas. This is really very hard."

Another difficulty for Turkish students in American universities is caused by the highly interactive structure of courses. According to Turkish participants, professors do not give much in the classroom, they want students to be involved with the topic and want to see students be active in learning. Regarding this issue, Evran stated that, "They want students' interpretations

and active participation. This does not mean that they do not know the subject matter, they do this intentionally as a part of their teaching strategy."

More Research and Writing

Turkish participants also reported some difficulties in conducting and writing research studies. According to Bengisu, her education was mainly based on auditory teaching methods, and she had problems adapting to this new research and reflective writing process. Evran had a similar experience, "We did not do much creative writing in Turkey. Therefore, it is another difficulty we face. Creating new ideas from other ideas is hard. But this is changing in a positive way, and I believe that if I do more reading and writing, this problem will be solved."

Relations with American students

The Turkish participants in this study provided interesting observations about their American classmates. According to the Turkish participants, in group work and in class activities, American students tend to ignore international students. Peri stated, "When I tried to explain something, it seemed they did not understand. But they did not try to understand and tended to ignore my ideas. In group relations they have the control, but in class presentations I presented as I believed." Evran had a similar view, saying, "I think American students tend to ignore their international classmates."

Change in Cultures

All participants stated that the culture of their society is changing and that nothing is as same as it was five or ten years ago. The Columbine High School shooting occurred the day before Susan was interviewed for this study, and it seemed to affect her deeply. Susan stressed the notion of cultural change in her interview, "[...] the culture has shifted a lot in the last 20 years. In the past, students were honest, hard working, and they really wanted to do for their country. They valued education, but I do not see that in this generation. They are very self-centered, they care so much about their own personal rights that they do not consider the right of the group. I think culture is changing." John expressed similar sentiments, "I think US culture has changed [...] kids used to be expected to respect their families. But in the last 40 years this has decreased, they respect others less and less."

Cultural shift is also a hot topic in Turkey – particularly, the effect of mass media (TV, American movies, etc.) is highly criticized because of perceived negative effects on society. For example, in the last 10 years people have started to use many English words in their daily

language, and values of Western culture have been diffused into the society so that traditional values have lost their hold on new generations. Interestingly, Turkish participants did not stress this point much. Only Evran mentioned the effect, while he was comparing Turkish culture with other Middle Eastern cultures, saying that European and Western cultures have some effect on Turkish society, and Turkish values and expectations are not as strict as they once were.

The cross-cultural research literature shows some evidence of this change in Turkish culture. For example, Hofstede's (1984) measures show that the US has the most individualistic culture in the world with a score of 91/100. Turkey's score was 37/100, which means that it is a collectivistic country. But in a more recent study, Goregenli (1995) found that Turkish culture shows characteristics of both individualism and collectivism. According to the researcher, the main reason for this change is the increased industrialization of Turkey since the 1980s.

Implications

The qualitative study reported here clearly shows that culture has some effect on differences in learning styles. The results of the study seem to indicate that cultural expectations toward power relationships in the classroom have some impact on students' preferences regarding learning strategies. This is evidenced by the fact that Turkish students, who stated that they typically experienced a highly autocratic, teacher-centered power structure in Turkish classrooms, were ill-prepared and initially uncomfortable with the use of learning strategies such as asking questions, collaborative activities, research projects and writing reflection papers than were American students, who stated that they had experienced less autocratic, somewhat more democratic power structures in American classrooms.

This study has important implications for the ongoing debate about change in the Turkish educational system. There are two major camps regarding the problems of the Turkish educational system. According to Buyukduvenci (1995), one view regarding education reform in Turkey argues that because of the general lack of transformation mentality in society, it is incredibly difficult to accomplish radical change in any educational system. In Turkey, the particular effects of family structure and theocratic culture do not foster acceptance of change. On the other hand, Turan (1997), who sides with those who take the opposing view, argues that, "It is questionable to blame the family structure and cultural context of a society, when it's people have no word and power in education reform efforts.

The following statement reflects the researchers' views in regard to this debate:

> "The foundation of a democracy is each citizen's capacity for self-government, and the belief that individuals must be capable of self-government before they can be capable of contributing in a positive manner to the greater society. Education is the first act of self-government, in that individuals must govern their own education and development in order to govern their own lives. Therefore, every individual citizen has the right and responsibility to determine the course of their own education (Bichelmeyer, 1999)."

If the school system really does not satisfy citizens' expectations, the initiative should come from these same citizens to have a better system. But, as noted by the Turkish participants of this study, in Turkish society citizens generally want to see the reflection of their family structures in the schools. This obviously keeps the status quo. For example, there are few Turkish citizens who are happy with the central university entrance exam, but no demand comes from these citizens to change the traditional school system in order to address the problem. Without having democratic principles as a part of personal values, changes to the educational system can hardly occur.

On the other hand, the researchers cannot discount the reasons for the opposing view. Since Turkish people are educated via this system's schools, these values are, at least in part, transferred to them through the schools. At some level, this is a "chicken and egg" problem. It may be impossible to determine what causes what. Therefore, it seems that both factors - society and the school system - should de simultaneously addressed.

Another finding of this study is there are indications of shifting expectations among Turkish students from collectivist culture toward greater acceptance of individualistic cultural norms. In related studies, researchers have found that individualism is an important characteristic that distinguishes US culture from collectivist cultures such as Turkey. The researchers expected to find preferences for collectivistic culture elements from Turkish participants compared to cultural preferences of American participants. There was some data gathered in this study to indicate that this may not be the case, but more data needs to be collected in order to determine whether there is a clear trend. This tentative finding does, however, appear to parallel the results of recent research about the fluctuating individualistic and collectivistic characteristics of Turkish culture.

A final, major implication of this study is directed toward teachers in multicultural settings. From participants' explanations, it appears that students make their own efforts to overcome problems caused by cultural differences. Yet, it is clear that teaching style has an effect on students' successful adjustment to a new educational culture. Teachers should be aware of

cultural differences between students, and should be aware that their teaching strategies may create, facilitate, and potentially hinder students' use of culturally determined learning styles. This means that teachers may want to develop strategies to prepare students for the cultural differences in learning approaches. For example, in at least one department at the Midwestern university studied here, all new students participate in an orientation program at the beginning of each year that addresses instructional expectations, acknowledges cultural differences, and attempts to create a collaborate culture among all students. This approach may also be used by other departments and other universities where there are significantly large multicultural student populations.

In regard to the findings and implications of this study, the researchers acknowledge that cultural differences do not eliminate individual preferences, nor do they negate an individual's ability to change and adapt to new situations. This study does, however, appear to support the general notion that different cultural influences have some impact on preferred learning strategies. Further research needs to be completed in order to more fully and thoroughly understand the nature and range of these influences.

Limitations of the Study

The most fundamental limitation of this study was the small number of participants. It is obvious that generalizations can not be made based on the experiences of five people from two cultures, since their response characteristics could be expected to change based on their demographic characteristics (age, experience, sub-culture, etc.). For this reason alone, further studies with greater numbers of participants need to be completed in order to better understand the issues that influence differences in preferred learning styles among learners from different cultures.

Even though Turkish participants were chosen to represent a cultural group from which students had minimal exposure to other cultures before coming to the USA, was not possible to eliminate or minimize the effects of cultural pollution on the Turkish participants of the study. For example, the following comments from Peri show the effect of one American movie on her cultural and educational views, "I was impressed by one TV series that I watched several years ago [She was talking about 'Fame'.] In that movie, there was a literature class. In that class, the relations between the teacher and the students were so great, and that was my dream teaching approach."

Ideas for Further Study

The findings of the present study point to the fact that there is a general need for researchers to continue documenting teachers' and students' perspectives on the impact of different cultures on differences in learning style. Future studies should continue to explore this question, and do so from a variety of lens, including the perspectives of faculty and educational administrators.

In addition to comparing the learning styles of students from the two particular cultures of Turkey and the United States, further research should include additional cultural groups. The professional literature indicates that Asian and Turkish learning styles have some similar characteristics. This could be verified by further research.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods should be used as we continue to address this topic. Doing so may lead to the refined development and use of an adequate cultural model questionnaire as it relates to preferred learning styles. The development of such a tool would be eminently useful in building larger data pools to help with our understanding of issues related to this research question.

References

Bayram, S. and Seels, B. (1997). The utilization of Instructional Technology in Turkey. ETR&D, 45, (1), 112-121.

Bichelmeyer, B. (1999). Personal independent learning systems: a systemic approach to individualizing instruction, [On-line]. Available: http://php.indiana.edu/~bbichelm/pils/.

Binbasioglu, C. (1995). Turkiye Egitim Bilimleri Tarihi. MEB Yayinevi.

Brittanica (1998). Encyclopedia Britannica. Macropedia. Vol. 15, 1998.

Buyukduvenci, S.(1995). John Dewey's Impact on Turkish Education. In J. Garrison, The New Scholarship on Dewey. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995.

Dewey, J. (1983). Report and recommendation upon Turkish education. In J.A. Boydston, John Dewey: The middle works, 1899-1924, Vol 15. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dunn, R., Gemake, J., Jalali, F. and Zenhausern, R. (1990). Cross-cultural diffferences in learning styles of elementary-age students from four ethnic backgrounds. Journal of multicultural counseling and development, 18, 68-93.

Goregenli, M. (1995). Kulturumuz acisindan bireycilik-toplumculuk egilimleri: Bir baslangic calismasi. [Individualism-Collectivism orientations in Turkish culture: A preliminary study]. Turk Psikoloji Dergisi, 10(35), 1-14.

Griggs, S.S. (1991). Learning Styles Counseling. Educational Resources Information Center. ERIC document.

Hofstede, G. (1980). Culture's Consequences, Sage, London.

Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural differences in Teaching and Learning. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10, 301-320

Katz, N. (1988). Individual learning style: Israeli norms and cross-cultural equivalence of Kolb's learning style inventory. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 19(3), 361-379.

Keefe, J. W. (1979). Learning style: An overview. In NASSP's Student learning styles: Diagnosing and prescribing programs (pp. 1-17)

Merriam, S. (1988). Case study research in education: A qualitative approach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nelson, G. (1995). Cultural differences in learning styles. In J. Reid (ed.), Learning styles in ESL/EFL classroom, 3-18. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Oxford, R. & Anderson, N. (1995). A cross-cultural view of learning styles. Language teaching 28(4), 201-205.

Ramirez, M. and Williams, D.R.P. (1974). Cognitive styles of children of three ethnic groups in the United States. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 5(2), 212-219.

Swisher, K. and Deyhle, D. (1987). Styles of learning and learning of styles: Educational conflicts for American Indian/Alaskan native youth. Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 8(4), 345-360.

Trompenaars, F. (1994). Riding the Waves of Culture. Irwin Professional Publishing.

Turan, S. (1997). John Dewey's report of 1924 and his recommendations on the Turkish educational system revisited. Paper presented at the meeting of the AERA, 1997.

Zaman (1999). Zaman Newspaper.
http://www.zaman.com.tr/arsiv/2000/01/13/guncel/23.html

Zaman (2000). Zaman Newspaper.
http://www.zaman.com.tr/arsiv/1999/07/28/guncel/24.html